



Think Like a Commander

by Lou Crist

This article was originally published on November 18, 2025, by From The Green Notebook at <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2025/11/18/think-like-a-commander> and is reprinted here with their permission.

Several years ago, during an interview, I was asked, “What is the most important thing an S2 does?” The question took me aback. After some thought, I answered that the S2 should impart their understanding of the enemy to the commander. The interviewer sighed and replied, “No. Your job is to think like a commander.” At the time, I didn’t fully grasp his meaning. Years of experience and reflection have since convinced me that he was right.

A good S2 masters Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment (IPOE) and becomes the subject matter expert on the enemy. A great S2 studies friendly maneuver, knowing their unit’s mission, organization, and tactics to make intelligence relevant. An exceptional S2 goes further, becoming the commander’s intellectual partner in defeating the enemy.

The Role of the S2

Military intelligence doctrine is thorough, and IPOE is indispensable for threat analysis. Yet many S2s stop at describing the environment and the enemy. For years, I did the same, assuming that if I filled out the IPOE template and briefed the checklist, the “So What” would reveal itself. It seldom did. As an Observer Coach Trainer, I saw the same pattern: S2s competently outlined the threat but failed to make recommendations that shaped operations. When the analysis lacked relevance, commanders inevitably asked, “Give me the So What.” What they really wanted was a bridge between enemy understanding and friendly action. To achieve that bridge, the S2 must understand friendly maneuver.

Intelligence officers must study their unit’s mission, organization, and doctrine. Understanding what the unit does, and how it fights, is the foundation of relevance. Every branch has

distinct intelligence needs. Field artillery units want to know how the enemy detects and targets them: radar coverage, long-range fires, and position areas for artillery. Airborne units care about drop zones, enemy air defense artillery, and counterattack forces. Armor and logistics formations have equally specific priorities. Knowing the unit’s tactics allows the S2 to translate intelligence into operational value. Without that understanding, analysis often remains obscured.

Visualization Drives Relevance

Visualization is the first tenet of thinking like a commander. Clausewitz compared war to a wrestling match between two opposing wills. Sun Tzu taught that victory depends on knowing both the enemy and oneself. The S2 must visualize this interplay across time, space, and purpose, not just describing the enemy, but anticipating the fight. Understanding friendly maneuver provides the lens through which the enemy’s reactions become visible. It enables predictive analysis, focuses attention on what matters, and removes the burden of presenting everything. Visualization also cultivates a shared language. Every branch has its dialect, and learning to “speak maneuver” builds credibility and trust. Mastering that language is the first step toward thinking like a commander.

Risk Lives in Uncertainty

Risk framing is the second tenet of thinking like a commander. Commanders live in uncertainty, and the degree of that uncertainty defines their risk. The S2 cannot remove risk, but by reducing uncertainty about the enemy, they shape how the commander perceives and manages it. If we knew everything about the enemy, intent, disposition, and capability, there would be no risk. But we never do. The S2’s role is to define that gap between what is known and unknown, to describe how it threatens the mission, and to drive collection to close it. Risk to force matters only in how it endangers

mission success, and risk to mission begins where uncertainty lives. When the S2 frames intelligence in terms of uncertainty, they give the commander what they need most, a clearer picture of what is at stake and where to act.

Frame Decisions, Not COAs

Decision framing is the third tenet of thinking like a commander. Commanders think in terms of decisions. So should the S2. Rather than drowning in multiple enemy courses of action, define what the enemy is trying to achieve, and identify when, where, and how they will fight. Reducing enemy intent to a sequence of decisions makes the threat both intelligible and actionable. This approach naturally drives wargaming and supports decision-point tactics. It also sharpens the S2's recommendations for disrupting the enemy's decision cycle, whether through fires, deception, or maneuver. The commander decides, but the S2's excellence lies in anticipating those decisions and linking them to enemy action in time and space.

Objections & Emotional Intelligence

Some may argue that the S2's job is to define the problem, the S3's to propose solutions, and the commander's to decide. Doctrinally true, but practically incomplete. The S2 cannot define the right problem without thinking like a commander. If the S2's understanding ends at the enemy, the staff's options will be limited and cautious because they can only see half the picture. The commander will be left to do the imaginative work of connecting threat, terrain, and friendly action. In such cases, intellectual capacity across the staff goes unused. Others suggest that better staff integration, early S3 coordination, reverse IPOE, or full wargaming, compensates for this gap. Those methods are ideal but rare. Wargaming is often skipped, and reverse IPOE seldom performed. When time limits integration, the S2 must still wargame mentally, anticipating commander questions and shaping mission analysis from the outset.

Thinking like a commander does not mean overstepping authority. It demands tact, self awareness, and timing. Not

every commander welcomes intellectual challenge, and some discourage staff initiative. But great commanders value subordinates who think, anticipate, and contribute meaningfully. The S2 must gauge the environment, read the personality of the commander, and know when to offer insight and when to listen.

I will leave you with an example. Commander Edwin Layton, Admiral Chester Nimitz's intelligence officer during the Pacific War, exemplified what it means for an intelligence officer to think like a commander. In the weeks before the Battle of Midway, Layton and his team synthesized signals intelligence, reconnaissance reports, and enemy logistics patterns to assess both the timing and direction of the Japanese attack. But Layton went further than analysis. He recommended how Nimitz should posture the fleet to exploit that expectation. His framing of the situation in terms of friendly maneuver allowed Nimitz to mass his limited carriers northeast of Midway, positioning them to strike the Japanese first. When the Japanese fleet appeared exactly where and when he anticipated, the result was one of the most decisive victories in naval history. Layton's brilliance lay not only in knowing the enemy but in sharing the commander's visualization of how to defeat him.

A good S2 owns their lane and knows the enemy. A great S2 understands friendly maneuver and delivers relevant, predictive intelligence. An exceptional S2 transcends both, becoming the commander's intellectual partner in defeating the enemy. Excellence for the intelligence officer lies not in the perfection of process, but in the alignment of thought, thinking with the commander. ✨

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